



THE COLESBURG POTTERY

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Colesburg Pottery

Beside the main street of Colesburg, in northeastern Iowa, is an empty lot, with a sunken well, a few stones of a discarded kiln, and the torn, uneven surface of what once was the floor of a large basement. A rubbish pile adds its discordant note. To the observant onlooker who knows the story, this unused, rubbish-filled lot recalls a once promising enterprise, the Colesburg Pottery. Here, for over half a century, the manufacture of clay products was a pet project of several ambitious men, who had visions of making Colony Township, Delaware County, the pottery-producing center of the nation, as Mason City later became known as the world's center for the manufacture of drainage tile.

But these visions have disappeared; and today few people in Colony Township realize the possibilities of this local project. The pottery began humbly in 1857, when David Roberts recognized the possibility of using the rich deposits of Ma-

quoketa shale in Delaware County. Upon the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 3 in Colony Township, about two and a half miles east of Colesburg, great quantities of blue clay, produced by the weathering of the shale, were found, part of the formation which extends from Bellevue, Jackson County, to Winneshiek County on the Minnesota line. These deposits, the oldest of the geological formations exposed in Delaware County, vary from one to fifteen miles in width and extend for over a hundred miles across the northeast corner of Iowa. In the deep valley cut by the rampaging Little Turkey, the Maquoketa shale and clay were left exposed and tests proved the excellent quality of this clay in making high grade wares.

Roberts remodeled an old church building to house the manufacturing unit, but he had just made a beginning, when fire destroyed the premises during the latter part of 1858. Without substantial financial backing to rebuild, he was compelled to discontinue the project. Today David Roberts is best known as the father of George E. Roberts, who later became Director of the United States Mint, but in his own right, he had envisioned an industrial project that many men were to develop during the next half century.

At that time the lack of transportation was the main obstacle in the way of many manufacturers

in interior Iowa, for they had to have an outlet for the disposal of their products. This handicap was to plague the pottery concern at Colesburg during its entire history. The early roads were nearly impassable in some seasons, as they followed the many hillsides or by-passed the numerous sloughs farther south in the valley of Plum Creek. Nor did railroads offer much encouragement. The Illinois Central Railroad did not begin its march westward from Nottingham, later renamed Earlville, until 1859, and the Chicago Great Western Railroad did not reach Dyersville until the eighties. Even then Colesburg had no railroad.

In spite of these difficulties the clay quarries found another champion in E. Jones, of whom little is known except that he rebuilt the pottery upon its original site in 1859. Jones continued his enterprise upon a small scale until 1871 when he sold out to Michael Stegner and Philip Stillinger. A year later another partnership, F. A. Grimes and R. C. Currie, purchased the plant, and it remained in the possession of these men for fourteen years.

It was during the Grimes-Currie ownership that the pottery first reached a substantial production level. As the earlier owners had done, Grimes and Currie devoted most of their efforts to the manufacture of ceramics or glazed wares. In 1878

these articles were described as including fine patterns of hanging baskets, milk jars, jelly cups, bowls, and other articles too numerous to mention. Flower pots, however, soon became the backbone product of the business, and plans for 1878 called for the production of 100,000 of these articles during the year, all finished by hand with only crude machinery to prepare the clay.

F. A. Grimes was an important figure in the early development of northeastern Iowa. In later years he was spoken of as a capitalist. He became president of the Delta Lumber Company in Mississippi, and was an instrumental factor in establishing the Colesburg Farmers Savings Bank.

At the peak of this period eight men were employed. The clay, dug two and a half miles east of the plant, was hauled in by sled or wagon and stored in the basement of the factory until it could be used. A passerby could see the smoking 10-foot kilns, fed by basswood which abounded in the wood-covered hills nearby. This wood cost a dollar and a half a cord. Just outside the building, a horse moved in a circle, giving power to a pugmill or mixer. The horse, hitched to a beam, pulled a sweep that turned a shaft having fin-shaped projections or knives which rotated and kept kneading the clay in the large vat. By this means the clay was mixed with water until its texture was

right for molding. Screening was necessary to remove the stones.

Inside the building the "turning" — the term applied to the molding of the product — took place. This was done by hand and was an expert's job. Most turners were men brought in from eastern potteries. With the help of plaster of Paris molds, the pliable clay was shaped into the desired patterns, and the articles were then placed in drying rooms. After the products were dry they were baked to complete the hardening process. After vetrification, ceramics were dipped into a chemical solution that gave them a hard, glazed, and lasting finish.

In 1885, after a profitable period of operation, the partnership of Grimes and Currie dissolved. Frank Brock then took possession of the pottery, but sold it in 1889 to a new adventurous duo, C. J. Jacobs and A. L. Landis. The growth of nurseries in the Midwest had accelerated the demand for flower pots, and building brick and drainage tile were seen as profitable products. Never, in all of the twenty-two years of its existence, had the pottery industry seemed so promising.

Realizing the necessity of increasing their production output, Jacobs and Landis looked for new capital and in 1901 they persuaded T. A. Foote, then superintendent of the Colesburg schools, to

join them. His selection proved to be a fortunate choice. Foote, who had inventive talent, advocated modernizing the business. A 40-horse power steam engine was installed and the plant was equipped with modern machinery for preparing the clay. Other innovations followed. The plaster of Paris molds were discarded in favor of custom steel molds. A machine for molding flower pots was added, and soon it became possible for an expert to turn out 7,000 units within the customary 10-hour working day.

When business boomed almost magically and the enterprise faced future expansion, associates advised the partners to incorporate and in 1904 the Colesburg Pottery Company was organized with a capital of \$20,000. J. F. Wilcox, a well-known florist of Council Bluffs, became president, Joe Klaus, a farmer near Colesburg, was vice president, and Mr. Foote become secretary and treasurer.

Production of flower pots was now accelerated to meet carload orders, and the manufacture of ceramics was discontinued. Complete production lines were installed in both stories of the 70-foot building. The upper story was equipped to make two-inch flower pots — the size in most demand; while the ground floor handled those up to a 16-inch diameter. A chaser, or modern pugmill,

weighing 15,000 pounds, was installed. This power-driven device had three-foot cast-iron wheels which, rotating on a bed of cast-iron plates, ground the clay and rocks into a pliable mass. Screening was no longer necessary. Steam was piped from the engine through 3,000 feet of steel pipe to make the drying units.

In 1905, 10,000 flower pots could be turned out in one day, instead of the 100,000 a year forecast in 1878. The new corporation employed fifteen men and looked toward a national market. An advertising campaign began, and space was bought regularly in *The Florist Review* and *The American Florist*. Mr. Wilcox, who was also president of the largest nursery west of Chicago, kept up sales through his personal contacts.

The company had a right to have faith in its product. The Maquoketa shale was almost free of the usual calcareous fossiliferous bands and a yellow clay needed to make the flower pots more porous was also found near the plant. In 1903 exhibits were sent to the St. Louis Exposition, and the company was awarded second prize for quality. The A. A. Hughes Company of Cambridge, Massachusetts, in business for a century, was the only clay ware producer to excel the Iowa company in this line.

Sales expansion soon reached into sixteen

States. Flower pots were shipped as far west as Idaho Falls, Idaho, and as far south as Roswell, N. M. Carload lots were sold in St. Louis, the Twin Cities, and Kansas City. Many nurseries in Dubuque, Cedar Rapids, and Iowa City offered a strong local market.

But the men who guided the destiny of the growing business were still beset with transportation worries. They, as those who had preceded them, sought constantly for a railroad outlet. This seemed a possibility when M. W. Savage of Minneapolis, millionaire manufacturer of stock feed and owner of the famous horse "Dan Patch", planned the Dan Patch Airline Railroad between Minneapolis and Dubuque. Surveying had been completed through Colesburg in December, 1907, but the project ended in bankruptcy. The nearest railroad outlet was at Osterdock on the Milwaukee Railroad about eight miles north of Colesburg, but the roads in this direction were hilly and often impassable.

Later, the Chicago Great Western Railroad established a spur some ten miles south of Colesburg and a small station was opened through the combined efforts of the pottery men at Colesburg and the people of Petersburgh, a German settlement. Other outlets used for shipping were Earlville and Dyersville, both on the Illinois Central, and Al-

moral on the Great Western, about fourteen miles from Colesburg, but the pottery was never closer than eight miles to the all important iron rails.

In 1910 Mr. Foote, whose big white team had hauled many a two-ton load to Dubuque in one day, decided to utilize the coming mechanical transportation. He purchased an Avery Truck in Peoria, Illinois, and delivery was made to Des Moines. A four-cylinder job, weighing 7,000 pounds, the Avery had the distinction of being the first truck in northeastern Iowa. It had steel-tired wooden wheels forty-two inches in diameter. Wooden pegs driven through the six-inch rims gave traction. The vehicle was the outstanding novelty of the countryside, and if Mr. Foote had charged admission he could easily have paid the \$2,500 list price. On his overnight stop in Marshalltown on the way from Des Moines to Colesburg, nearly fifty people were counted at one time about the vehicle, which caused as much of a sensation as a rocket ship would cause today.

The Avery was an interesting spectacle as it pulled two loaded wagons behind it on its four mile an hour trip to the railroad but it could not go when a team failed. Many times the company had to refuse or cancel telegraphed orders because the shipment could not be transported to a railroad. At the sale price of three dollars a thousand

for two-inch flower pots, transportation overhead devoured most of the profits.

Brick manufacture, hollow building tile, and even drainage tile were added to promote a more stable output. The Platt funeral home upon Colesburg's main street (later a tavern) and several homes in Colesburg were constructed of iridescent tile made at the local pottery. Several farms in both the Colesburg and Petersburgh vicinity used its drainage tile, but the local market could not support the company.

Finally, in 1916, when the modern truck and improved paved highways were still hopes rather than realities and with little prospect of a railroad, the company decided to disband. Small factories making clay wares were closing all over Iowa. In 1898 there were 349 producers of pottery in 87 counties of Iowa; in 1929 there were only 53 such plants in 31 counties.

For several years the unpainted, grey-colored frame structure stood deserted, like an old saw-mill after the timber had been felled. The weathering of the lumber indicated where additions had been made. Attempts were made to use the pottery plant for other purposes but it remained empty, a playground for school children in the daytime and a club house for the local poker club at night. Colesburg residents still chuckle as they

recall one cold December night when the husbands, challenging straights and three of a kind in their snug retreat, were routed by the irate spouses who gathered at the kilns, made a smudge pot out of green basswood, and then smoked out their husbands. The men ran from their den in their shirt sleeves, and to this day no one knows who had won the last stake.

After a number of years, fire of unknown origin razed the building, and the kilns were torn down. Now only the vacant lot marks the place where one of northeastern Iowa's most ambitious industries once gave promise of success.

LOREN TAYLOR